

THE EXPERIENCE OF FOSTERING NEGLECTED CHILDREN: EXAMINING THE IMPACT ON FOSTER PARENT SATISFACTION AND RETENTION IN CHILD WELFARE¹

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ABSTRACT: The current study investigated the experience of foster parents who were caring for children who had experienced neglect and examined the impact of that experience on foster parent retention. Foster parents completed questionnaires designed to investigate role satisfaction and description of their fostering experience. Nearly three quarters of the foster parents in the sample were currently caring for children who had experienced neglect. Foster parents of both neglected and abused children reported high levels of difficulty managing child behavior in their home. In comparison to foster parents of nonneglected children, foster parents of neglected children rated their behavior as significantly more difficult. They also reported that, compared to foster parents of nonneglected children, this difficult behavior had more impact on their consideration to withdraw from fostering. Despite facing challenges when fostering a neglected child, however, these foster parents did not report a lower level of satisfaction in their fostering role. The findings are discussed in relation to their implications regarding policy, training, treatment, and future research.

Key words: foster parent, retention, neglect.

There is a desperate need for foster parents because increasing numbers of children are being admitted into child welfare care in Canada (Health Canada, 2001). Not only are there larger numbers of children placed into the foster care system, but these children also have increasingly complex needs requiring specialized services

¹This study was made possible through the financial support of the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies. The support of the nine southwest Ontario children's aid societies and Dianne Cresswell of the Children's Aid Society of London and Middlesex is greatly appreciated

(Rosenfeld et al., 1997). In part, this challenge related to children's needs reflects the increasing number of children who have experienced abusive and neglectful parenting prior to their entering care (Kates, Johnson, Rader, & Strider, 1991). In particular, the number of children who have experienced neglect continues to rise (King, Leschied, Whitehead, Chiodo, & Hurley, 2003), and studies have shown that neglected children emerge as the most negatively affected when compared to the children who have experienced other forms of maltreatment (e.g., Gaudin, 1999). The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between fostering neglected children and foster parent attitudes and retention.

The Crisis in Child Welfare and Foster Care

In 2000, there were 60,000 Canadian children in care, an increase of 30% over the previous three years (HRDC, 2000). In Ontario, the number of children in care almost doubled between the years of 1993 and 2002 (King et al., 2003). With such large numbers of children in care the pressure on the child welfare system to deliver effective services has become increasingly challenging.

The Canadian Incidence Study (CIS) found that child neglect was involved in 40% of all reported cases of child maltreatment. Of the 53,922 cases investigated for child neglect, 43% were substantiated, and 20% remained suspected by child welfare services (Health Canada, 2001). Child neglect now forms the majority of child maltreatment cases (Trocme, Phaneuf, Scarth, Fallon, & MacLaurin, 2003). In Ontario the number of substantiated cases of neglect doubled between the years 1993 and 1998 (King et al., 2003). In addition, 60% of child neglect cases remained open for ongoing child welfare services. Furthermore, and of specific interest to the current study, children who had experienced child neglect compared to children entering care with histories of other forms of child maltreatment were more often placed in out-of-home care (Trocme et al., 2003).

The foster care system is in considerable crisis because the number of referrals to child welfare has escalated in contrast to the recruitment of new foster parents. Within the foster care system there are high rates of placement breakdowns leading to foster parent withdrawals from service. (Rycus & Hughes, 1998). This occurs, in part, because many active foster families are unable to adequately address the special needs of children in their care. Consequently, many foster parents, stressed by the demand placed upon them, leave their fostering commitment prematurely as a result of frustration with their relationship to the sponsoring agency or as a result of feeling overwhelmed by the needs of children in their care (Rycus & Hughes, 1998).

What is neglect?

Child neglect is defined by Health Canada (1997) as a condition in which a caregiver fails to provide the "essential requisites to a child's emotional, psychological, and physical development." Child neglect occurs due to a lack of appropriate parenting and/or a failure to provide adequate care resulting in potential harm to the child (Schumacher, Slep, & Heyman, 2001). Thus, child neglect is an *omission* of behavior, as opposed to physical maltreatment, which is considered a *commission* of

behavior (Erickson & Egeland, 1996). Researchers have identified subtypes of child neglect as physical, emotional, medical, mental health, and educational neglect. These may occur alone or in combination (Erickson & Egeland, 1996).

Despite the prevalence of child neglect, it has received surprisingly little attention in the maltreatment literature. Two decades ago, Wolock and Horowitz (1984) coined the phrase "the neglect of neglect" in describing the place of neglect in maltreatment research. Unfortunately, this trend has persisted, in part, due to the common practice among researchers of defining child maltreatment solely as child abuse and seldom distinguishing between child abuse and child neglect (Belsky, 1993). A recent review of risk factors for child neglect by Schumacher, Slep, and Heyman (2001) delineated criteria of inclusion for studies utilizing representative samples and clear differentiation between types of maltreatment, reporting only 10 studies that met these criteria between 1974 to 1998.

Neglected Children in Foster Care

When a child is placed into child welfare care due to substantiated allegations of neglect, it is critical that caregivers are aware of the profound effects that experiencing neglect can have on a child and of the resulting difficulties in caring for these children. Hildyard and Wolfe (2002) indicated that the effects of child neglect during childhood and adolescence are pervasive and negatively impact the "child's early competence across major developmental dimensions" (p. 685). Overall, these authors point to cognitive deficits, social withdrawal, low peer acceptance, and high internalizing behaviors as subsequent effects of child neglect. The researchers of the Minnesota Mother-Child Project, an investigation of the effects of child maltreatment, suggest that neglect is chronic rather than episodic and, as a result, children slowly lose their spirit, no longer possessing a will to connect with others (Erickson & Egeland, 1996).

Attachment Theory and Its Relation to Neglect

Attachment theory is frequently used as a theoretical context accounting for the effects of child maltreatment. The theory allows for consideration of developmental, environmental, and interpersonal influences on attachment, which are critical when considering intervention with maltreated children (Crittendon & Ainsworth, 1989). Attachment theory suggests that if children experience neglect, a severe form of insensitive care giving, they are at risk of forming a nonsecure attachment to their caregiver (Hughes, 1997). In a meta-analysis of studies investigating attachment quality in maltreatment samples, Morton and Browne (1998) found a significantly higher proportion of nonsecurity in maltreatment samples. Finzi et al. (2001) noted that because of their cognitive representational models of relationships and of themselves, neglected children are at greater risk for social withdrawal and social rejection, in addition to feelings of incompetence. These cognitive models are modified through development and experience, and become a general cognitive working model influencing a wide variety of relationships, including those with foster parents (Goldberg, 2000).

The Impact of Neglect on Foster Parenting

A foster parent's awareness of the frame of mind of a child entering foster care following an experience of neglect is crucial. Hughes (1999) suggests that these parents need to be trained so they can provide an emotionally stable environment while concurrently facilitating the child's ability to form an attachment with them in a deliberate manner. In this type of situation, it is possible that neglected children entering foster care may be able to shift their negative representations of caregivers to a more positive one given that foster parents provide the required support and care.

Successful placements in a foster family share certain characteristics: First, the children wish to be fostered and have minimal behavioral difficulties. Second, the foster parents are committed, warm and encouraging, and they enjoy the child, have clear expectations, and are able to cope effectively when faced with difficult behavior. Third, there is a positive relationship between the child and the foster parent (Baker et al., 2003). A neglected child may pose certain obstacles to successful placement outcomes, particularly when it comes to behavioral difficulties and an ability to form a relationship with their foster parent.

Satisfaction and Retention in Foster Care

In light of the increasing numbers of children coming into care, it is important that there be sufficient available placements for these children in foster homes. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Kufeldt, Este, McKenzie, & Wharf (2003) noted that the foster parent shortage is not necessarily a result of inadequate recruitment but a difficulty in retention. Former foster parents cited a lack of support from agencies, poor communication with workers, and difficult behavior of their foster child as reasons for leaving fostering (Rhodes, Orme, & Buehler, 2001). In contrast, current foster parents reported that overall satisfaction with fostering was related to their intent to continue to foster (Denby, Rindfleisch, & Bean, 1999). Clearly, if foster parents are to remain in fostering, they need to feel supported, competent, and satisfied in their role (Denby et al., 1999). Ongoing educational opportunities for foster parents are viewed as critical in their relationship to foster parent retention (Denby et al., 1999). Nevertheless, Rhodes et al. (2001) reported that only half of a sample of foster parents received additional training following their approval. Fees et al. (1998) identified that another factor contributing to the attrition of foster parents is the increasing number of children with more severe problems entering care. Training can mitigate these challenges if it is considered useful and relevant.

The Present Study

The overarching purpose of the current study was to gather information regarding foster care and child neglect, and to examine the perception of foster parents' satisfaction and its relation to foster parent retention.

The second purpose of the current study was to examine foster parents' opinions of their training regarding child maltreatment. The following was hypothesized: (a) the content of training would not be specific to child neglect, (b) foster parents

would indicate that the training was not based on their identified training needs, (c) foster parents would report feeling less competent and confident in their ability to care for a neglected child due to the lack of detailed information given in training regarding their needs, and (d) foster parents would report a need for information regarding the effects of neglect. In addition, an exploration of the topics related to child neglect that foster parents feel should be included in training was gathered.

The third purpose of this study was to identify whether fostering a neglected child had an effect on foster parent satisfaction and retention. The following events were hypothesized: (a) Foster parents of children who had experienced neglect would be more likely to report consideration to withdraw from fostering due to the inherent difficulties in caring for these children. (b) Dealing with foster children's difficult behavior would be reported as impacting foster parents' consideration to withdraw from fostering. (c) Foster parents of neglected children would report a lower overall level of satisfaction in foster parenting, compared to foster parents of nonneglected children.

The fourth purpose of the study was to describe foster parents' relationship, interactions, and opinions regarding neglected foster children in their care. The following events were hypothesized: (a) Foster parents would describe the building of a relationship with a neglected foster child as difficult due to behaviors of the foster child, which are consistent with having a nonsecure attachment representational model. (b) Foster parents would report the neglected child in their care to have negative emotional expression and difficult behavior, to report the development of a relationship with this child as being difficult, and that their current relationship was distant. (c) Foster parents would report believing that their neglected child would exhibit behaviors indicative of nonsecure attachment in a situation similar to Ainsworth's Strange Situation.

Finally, the fifth purpose was to describe the feelings foster parents have regarding a child who has experienced neglect in their care.

METHOD

Participants

This study employed a convenience, consenting sample of 57 foster parents from seven counties in southwestern Ontario. No significant differences between foster parents of neglected and nonneglected children were found on demographic variables such as age, gender, education level, race, marital status, number of biological children, or years fostering. Foster parents of neglected children did report a higher income level than foster parents of nonneglected children.

Foster parents currently fostering a child who had experienced neglect comprised 73.7% of the sample. More specifically, the reasons for the foster children being removed from their biological home were the following: neglect only (29.8%), neglect and physical abuse (43.9%), physical abuse only (8.8%), and other than neglect or physical abuse (17.5%). For purposes of this investigation, two groups were formed from this sample. The foster parents of children who had experienced neglect consisted of parents who identified having a foster child who

experienced neglect alone, or neglect in combination with physical maltreatment. A comparison group consisted of foster parents who identified caring for a child who had experienced physical maltreatment or some other reason precipitating their coming into care.

Materials

A standardized quantitative questionnaire, *The Foster Parent Satisfaction Survey* (FPSS, Denby et al., 1999) was mailed to a larger sample of foster parents. For the purposes of the current study, portions of the survey relating to retention and satisfaction were used: (a) demographic social characteristics of the foster family and questions regarding the type of care foster families provided, (b) considerations to discontinue fostering, (c) opinions about fostering and the agency, (d) attitudes regarding foster parent training, and (e) satisfaction in foster parenting. In addition, a questionnaire was developed specifically for the current study regarding neglect². *The Fostering Neglected Children Questionnaire* (FNCQ) was created by developing items related to the major purposes of the study. This measure consisted of seven items assessing foster parents' training as well as experiences of fostering a child who had suffered neglect. In the first section regarding training, foster parents rated their opinion of maltreatment training indicating whether they would like more information regarding child neglect. In the second section regarding the experience of fostering a child who had suffered neglect, foster parents were asked to indicate whether the most recent child placed in their care had been placed in care because of neglect, physical abuse, or another reason (e.g., sexual abuse, abandonment). They were then asked to answer the remaining questions in relation to that particular child. Finally, the last question presented a scenario and possible child reactions to choose from, intended to assess the parent's perceived attachment relationship with the child.

Procedure

The FPSS was mailed to every foster family in all nine counties of southwestern Ontario by their respective Children's Aid Society. The completed questionnaires were returned by mail to the principal investigator. The return rate yielded a sample of 652 foster parents from a possible 1283 families (51%). The subsample for the current study was comprised of those foster parents who consented to participate in focus groups and completed the FNCQ. These foster parents completed the FNCQ at the conclusion of their focus group participation. The responses on the two questionnaires were matched for 44 of the participants for the final sample used for analysis.

RESULTS

Training

Foster parents indicated that children who had been neglected and abused were discussed together in training but overall rated their maltreatment training as helpful. However, the majority of foster parents did report a need for more information

² Copies of the questions can be obtained from the first author.

regarding children who had been neglected reflective of 94.7% of the sample, particularly regarding the effects of that previous neglect on their current behavior at home.

Satisfaction and Retention

Both foster parents of children who had been neglected ($M = 1.66$, $SD = .75$) and nonneglected children ($M = 1.58$, $SD = .67$) reported being satisfied with foster parenting, with no significant difference found between the two groups, $t(42) = 0.30$, *ns*. Foster parents of children who had experienced neglect reported feeling highly confident in their ability to care for a previously neglected child, $M = 8.36$ (on a 10-point scale), $SD = 1.51$. There was no significant difference between the foster parents of children who had been neglected and nonneglected children in their reports of feelings of confidence, $t(55) = 1.46$, *ns*. Foster parents of children who have experienced neglect reported feeling competent in caring for the children in their care. There was no significant difference between the foster parents of children who had been neglected and nonneglected children in their reports of feelings of competence, $t(42) = 1.10$, *ns*.

Of the foster parents who were caring for children who had been neglected, 59.4% indicated that they had considered withdrawing from fostering, while 40.6% of foster parents of nonneglected reported considering withdrawing. The difference between the two groups in the rates of consideration to withdraw from fostering was nonsignificant, $X^2 = .196$, *ns*. A significant difference was found between the two groups, $t(40) = 2.68$, $p < .05$, in that foster parents of children who had been neglected reported that responding to foster children's difficult behaviors impacted their consideration to withdraw from fostering more ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 1.49$) than foster parents of nonneglected children ($M = 2.23$, $SD = 1.18$).

Fostering a Neglected Child

Foster parents of children who had been neglected rated the behavior of the neglected child in their care to be significantly more difficult than the foster parents of nonneglected children. Significantly more foster parents of children who had been neglected reported feeling frustrated and angry in relation to the neglected child in their care than did the foster parents reporting their feelings regarding non-neglected children.

The emotional expression of the children in care was rated by both groups of foster parents as negative. The quality and frequency of interaction between the children and foster parents were rated as positive and moderately frequent, respectively, with no significant difference between the two groups of foster parents. The development of the relationship and the nature of the relationship were rated as moderately easy and moderately close, with no significant differences between foster parent groups.

It was hypothesized that foster parents of children who had been neglected would rate the children in their care as displaying behaviors indicative of nonsecure attachment in a situation alike to Ainsworth's Strange Situation. Both groups endorsed nonsecure verbalizing, attention, interaction, and emotion behaviors, with no significant differences between the two groups.

DISCUSSION

The current study explored foster parents' experiences with children who had been neglected. This information provides valuable input regarding foster parent retention within the child welfare system. Subgoals of the current study investigated the opinions of foster parents regarding the training they received; whether fostering children who had been neglected was related to foster parent satisfaction and retention; and describing foster parents' relationships, interactions, and opinions regarding children who had been neglected in their care.

Foster parent training

Relevant and useful foster parent training is an essential aspect for retention and recruitment of foster parents. As evidenced in this study, foster parent training appears to be following the trend within the maltreatment literature of combining abuse and neglect (Belsky, 1993). However, the reality of researchers continuing to combine abuse and neglect in maltreatment studies does not negate the reality that many studies have shown abuse and neglect to have differential effects on children (i.e., Erickson & Egeland, 1996). Foster parent training programs need to reflect the different dimensions of abuse and neglect. Increasing the applicability and utility of training information, as noted by Fees et al. (1998), on topics such as the effects of neglect, behavior management strategies, and attachment patterns, would increase foster parent satisfaction.

Fostering a Neglected Child

Foster parents have the best of intentions toward the children in their care. However, these children may pose challenges to foster parents in delivering appropriate care, resulting in frustration in their role. From the present study, it appears that dealing with a foster child's difficult behavior represents a reason for foster parent's consideration to withdraw from fostering. Numerous studies now report that difficulties managing a foster child's behavior is a primary consideration for withdrawing from their foster care commitment (Rodger, Cummings, and Leschied, In Press; Rhodes et al., 2001; and Denby et al., 1999). Neglect appears to be the form of maltreatment driving the increase in the number of children in care in Ontario (Trocme et al., 2003). The finding that foster parents identified difficulty in managing the difficult behavior of the children who had been neglected in their care has the potential to affect foster parent retention to a very great extent.

Significantly more foster parents of children who had been neglected reported feeling frustrated and angry in relation to the child in their care. These results suggest that the experience of caring for children who had been neglected is different from the experience of caring for children who have experienced other forms of maltreatment. Because neglect is a chronic occurrence (Erickson & Egeland, 1996), children in care who have experienced neglect most likely lack the experience of caregiver nurturing in their biological home, thus failing to experience an essential element in the development of a secure attachment. McWey (2004) found that a substantial number of foster children in their sample, regardless of the type of

maltreatment they had experienced, were classified as avoidantly attached (a type of nonsecure attachment). This fact may result in children who have experienced neglect becoming hypervigilant in relationships and unreceptive to the messages of caring adults (Hughes, 1997). The lack of response from a child to a foster parents' nurturing overtures could eventually lead to the reported feelings of frustration and anger on the part of the foster parent as evidenced in this study.

Fostering Maltreated Children

It was hypothesized that there would be differences in foster parents' reports of their experiences in fostering neglected versus physically maltreated children. However, foster parents' reports of their experiences in fostering neglected versus abused children were quite similar. The inability of foster parents in the sample to discretely identify one form of maltreatment that the child experienced may be one explanation for the similarities in foster parents' reports. A portion of the number of children who had experienced neglect had also experienced abuse. Thus, the similarity in the results between experiences of fostering abused and neglected children could be due to the neglected children also having experienced abuse.

An alternative explanation for the similarity of foster parents' reports of their experiences fostering neglected and abused children may be related to the fact that all of the children concerned were children who were in care and hence collectively of high risk (Leschied, Whitehead, Hurley, & Chiodo, 2003). In an investigation into factors associated with foster care challenges, Holland and Gorey (2004) found the following characteristics in the majority of the children: they had been maltreated in some manner before being placed in care, they had families of origin commonly reflecting some form of pathology, and they had experienced various life problems due to mental health and behavioral challenges. These researchers found a relationship between these risk factors and foster care challenges that were encountered. Children placed in care generally have already faced, and continue to face, such varied challenges that it may be difficult to differentiate the impacts of risk factors on the foster care experience.

Foster Parent Retention

Foster parents are an essential resource within the child welfare system, and the retention of experienced foster parents is of the utmost importance in the face of the increasing numbers and high level of need of the children in care. Contrary to predictions, foster parents of children who had been neglected compared to non-neglected children did not report a lower level of satisfaction with foster parenting. This result may again be considered in terms of the findings that foster parents of children who have been neglected and nonneglected children reported similar opinions of, and experiences with, the children in their care. It would follow that both groups had similar levels of satisfaction in their fostering role. In addition, this result can be considered in conjunction with the finding that foster parents of children who had been neglected reported feeling highly confident in their ability to care for the neglected child as well as feeling competent to support the children in

their care. These results were consistent with research regarding motivation, which suggests that feeling capable to effectively perform a job results in feelings of greater satisfaction with the job (Hansen, Smith, & Hansen, 2002). Foster parents' reports that they feel confident and competent to handle the children in their care are positive signs for retention. Previous research has identified that these feelings influence foster parent satisfaction (Denby et al., 1999).

Directions for Future Research

Foster parents who continue fostering neglected children, despite child behavior problems that arise, may differ from those foster parents who do choose to discontinue fostering. The sample in this study involved just foster parents who, despite reporting the consideration to withdrawal, nonetheless continued in their fostering role. The experiences of foster parents who quit fostering may differ significantly from those who continued. Future research needs to focus on looking at the experiences of foster parents who have withdrawn their services to more fully appreciate what led to their withdrawal.

Limitations

Foster parents in this sample were all voluntary participants who had not only chosen to complete a questionnaire but had also volunteered to attend focus group meetings. Clearly, these were extremely dedicated foster parents and quite likely those that, even in the face of challenging situations, remain dedicated to their foster care involvement. In addition, the majority of the participants were female, and it is possible that the point of view of a male foster parent may differ from that of their female counterpart. It will be important for subsequent studies to be as inclusive as possible so that a wider range of opinions regarding the challenging of fostering children who had been neglected can be determined.

SUMMARY

Foster parents are amongst the key resources within child welfare agencies that provide services to an extremely needy group of children. The experiences of children who had been neglected, even within this high risk group of maltreated children, are unique in their challenges reflected in emotional and behavioral difficulties resulting in extreme challenges to foster parents who attempt to meet their emotional and behavioral needs. This study addressed some of the unique aspects of children who had been neglected to foster parents and addressed the training and support that foster parents require who in order to assist in their retention within the child welfare system.

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